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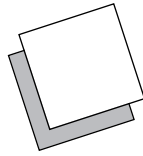
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# Evaluation of information sources in industrial marketing: implications for media planning in the Arabian Gulf

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**Keywords** Industrial marketing, International marketing, Marketing communications, Marketing planning, Media, Saudi Arabia

**Abstract** The top executives of 67 companies located in Saudi Arabia were surveyed to determine the importance of 14 sources of marketing information for making industrial purchases. The study included seven impersonal sources: Arabic magazines and newspapers; English magazines and newspapers; Gulf television; trade shows and exhibitions; billboards; brochures and pamphlets; and direct mail. The study also covered five interpersonal sources: past experience; relatives and family members; friends and colleagues at work; neighbors; and salesmen. The findings of the survey indicate to which sources the top executives attached high importance and which they had mixed feelings about.

## Introduction

One of the challenges facing marketing managers of industrial products and services in international markets is how best to carry their sales messages to the decision makers who make the purchase decisions for their companies. To deliver messages effectively, marketing managers should carefully match the media preferences of their target markets and the audience and/or readership profiles of available media types such as television, radio, direct mail, newspapers and magazines, outdoor, and others.

Because managers marketing industrial products face a number of unique market conditions, they must specialize their approach to serve their potential industrial customers. For instance, marketing managers generally deal with fewer buyers who buy in larger quantities. These customers are usually concentrated in limited geographic areas such as industrial parks. In addition, marketers deal with professional purchasing agents who are adept at getting the best buy for their companies. Moreover, these agents have the benefit of receiving input from a number of specialists within and outside their companies before making final purchase decisions. In light of the few identifiable, and concentrated potential buyers, the marketing managers of industrial products and services should hone their communication objectives to ensure that the communication media they pick will result in strong links with their targeted industrial buyers, thus resulting in sales.

A prerequisite to reaching and establishing strong links with industrial buyers is determining their attitudes toward various media channels. After all, the chances of marketers reaching and influencing industrial buyers is substantially improved when their message is delivered by the preferred information sources of the industrial buyers. Unfortunately, the literature is totally devoid of studies dealing with this issue.

**Delivering messages  
effectively**

## Study examines attitudes of executives in Saudi Arabia

## Evaluate the importance of marketing information

Knowing the attitudes of industrial buyers toward information sources is especially important in developing countries, since the purchase decision process tends to be centralized in such countries in the hands of a few top-level managers. Saudi Arabia is no exception to the general phenomenon of centralized decision making found in developing countries (Anastos *et al.*, 1980, p. 83; Badawy, 1980, p. 57). The top executives would make most of the operational decisions, including the purchase decisions. Thus, in order to reach these decision makers, marketers of industrial products and services to Saudi Arabia should be aware of how company executives evaluate different sources of marketing information when they make industrial buying decisions.

It is against this background that this study examines the attitudes of company executives in Saudi Arabia toward different information sources when transacting business purchases. The first section covers the survey methodology used in the study. This section describes the approach used by the researcher in designing a questionnaire and putting together a sample. A brief summary of the sample characteristics is also presented in this section. The second section of the paper discusses the results of the study. Finally, the last section summarizes the findings and focusses on the implications of the study's findings for international marketing managers.

### Survey methodology

#### *Questionnaire design*

The questionnaire was prepared in English. English was selected for three reasons. First, English is extensively used in conducting business affairs in Saudi Arabia (James, 1986). Saudi industries employ a multinational labor force mostly from former English-speaking countries such as India, Pakistan, and the Philippines, so the language of choice is English. Second, the sampling unit for the study is top executives. Almost invariably, the top executives of companies in Saudi Arabia speak English fluently since these executives are either Western-educated expatriates or they are Saudi Arabs who hold degrees in business administration from Western universities. Third, the use of English in the questionnaire eliminated the translation bias that would have been introduced to the survey instrument (Brislin, 1986; Douglas and Craig, 1983).

The questionnaire asked executives to evaluate the importance of 14 sources of marketing information as being important, uncertain, and unimportant. These 14 information sources included: Gulf television, Arabic magazines and newspapers, English magazines and newspapers, brochures and pamphlets, billboards, direct mail, trade shows and exhibitions, friends and colleagues at work, relatives and family members, neighbors, salesmen, and past experience. Two other potential sources for marketing communication, radio and E-mail, were not used in the study. The Saudi government will not permit commercial advertising to be broadcast from the government-owned radio stations (Tuncalp, 1992). Because of the limited availability and use of computers, E-mail is not a viable source of information at the present time.

#### *Field work*

Students were employed for the field-work phase of the survey which used a drop-off and pick-up technique. Students were instructed to approach the top managers of the companies they visited. For the purposes of this study, the top manager was defined as the highest authority in the company that

## Language screen

made the daily operational decisions, including industrial purchases. In most cases, these positions were either presidents or general managers. If neither of the top two managers was on the premises at the time of the visit, the students were instructed to approach these companies at a later date.

The questionnaires were hand-delivered to the top managers. Students first screened the top managers to determine if they were able to answer the questionnaire in English. If, in the student's judgment, a top manager failed this screen, the student had instructions to contact the next lower level manager in the company. Managers who passed the language screen were then informed about the purpose of the study. They were given copies of the questionnaire and were instructed to fill these questionnaires completely. Student field workers also told managers that they would be back in three days to collect the completed questionnaires personally. Students were instructed to call back at least three times before giving up on collecting a questionnaire.

### *Sample design*

The study took place in the eastern province of Saudi Arabia. This province has two industrial parks where most major manufacturers are located. The Dammam Industrial Estate provides industrial services to 153 companies and the recently-established Hufuf Industrial Estate already includes 11 companies. The proposed sample for this study consisted of the top executives of the 164 companies located in these two industrial parks.

As some of the companies refused to participate in the study, only 127 questionnaires were distributed. The mandatory three personal visits used by the field workers resulted in the completion of 67 questionnaires for a return rate of about 53 percent. Since this is a difficult environment in which to conduct research (Tuncalp and Yavas, 1987), the response rate was considered satisfactory.

## Convenience sample

Like other studies undertaken in Saudi Arabia, this study uses a convenience sample. The marketing research environment in the kingdom presents several problems from a sampling point of view (Tuncalp, 1988). First, no official census of manufacturing or any other sector of the industry exists. Likewise, other lists of population elements that could serve as sampling frames do not exist. These difficulties necessitate using purposive samples (Brislin and Baumgarden, 1971). Because of such difficulties, researchers conducting studies in consumer behavior and industrial marketing areas in Saudi Arabia have opted to use nonprobabilistic techniques (Al-Meer, 1989; Al-Nimir and Palmer, 1982; Ali *et al.*, 1987; Yavas, 1987a, 1987b, 1988; Yavas and Habib, 1987 Yavas *et al.*, 1989). Of course, such techniques make projecting the findings beyond the sample statistically inappropriate. However, since the study investigates an area which has never been dealt with previously, the findings of the present study and the implications based on these findings should be of assistance to marketers devising communication strategies for the Saudi market.

### *Profile of companies*

As can be seen from Table I, almost 60 percent of the executives in the sample worked in companies manufacturing industrial goods and services. Because Saudi Arabia has made significant strides during the past 20 years

	Percentage
<i>Type of company</i>	
Industrial products and services	59.7
Consumer products and services	40.3
<i>Date of establishment</i>	
1975 or before	26.9
After 1975	73.1
<i>Foreign partner</i>	
Yes	47.8
No	52.2
<i>Marketing department</i>	
Yes	76.1
No	23.9
<i>Number of employees</i>	
200 or fewer	52.2
Over 200	47.8
<i>Gross sales in riyals (3.75 riyals = 1 dollar)</i>	
100 million or less	65.7
Over 100 million	34.3

*Table I. Profile of companies*

toward installing a manufacturing base for many industrial products, the predominance in the sample of top executives from these companies is not surprising. The fact that three-quarters of the executives worked for companies that had been established after 1975, is another indication of the development of a recent manufacturing base. The largest number of executives, 14 altogether, reported that their companies were formed in 1980.

Almost half of the executives worked for joint ventures, whereas the remaining half were employed by wholly-owned Saudi concerns. In addition, more than three-quarters of the executives indicated that their companies had marketing departments. A little more than 50 percent of the executives reported working for companies that employed fewer than 200 employees. Finally, almost two-thirds of the executives worked for companies with gross sales less than 100 million riyals (3.75 riyals = 1 dollar).

### **Discussion of findings**

Table II shows the 14 information sources ranked according to importance. It is assumed that the higher the proportion of respondents who agreed on the importance of a source (level of consensus), the higher the importance of that source is to the sample of executives included in the study.

As can be seen from Table II, except for salesmen, the other 13 information sources were rated "important" by more than a majority of the sample. In addition, approximately three-quarters or more of the respondents evaluated the first six sources as important. Past experience was the highest ranked information source. The Arabic language newspapers, relatives and family members, trade shows and exhibitions, Arabic language magazines, and friends and colleagues at work, were ranked second through sixth in importance, respectively.

**Half of executives  
worked for joint ventures**

Placed in proper  
perspective

	Rank	Percentage		
		Important	Uncertain	Unimportant
Past experience	1	91.0	9.0	0.0
Arabic newspapers	2	80.6	16.4	3.0
Relatives and family members	3	79.1	14.9	6.0
Trade shows and exhibitions	4	77.6	13.4	9.0
Arabic magazines	5	76.1	16.4	7.5
Friends and colleagues at work	6	74.7	14.9	10.4
Gulf television	7	71.7	17.9	10.4
Neighbors	8	70.2	23.8	6.0
English magazines	9	65.7	25.3	9.0
English newspapers	10	62.7	26.9	10.4
Billboards	11	56.7	28.4	14.9
Brochures and pamphlets	12	52.3	37.3	10.4
Direct mail	13	52.2	26.9	20.9
Salesmen	14	37.3	38.8	23.9

*Table II. Rank order of information sources on degree of importance*

Between three-quarters and two-thirds of the executives agreed on the importance of the next three sources: Gulf television, neighbors, and English language magazines. Finally, the English-language newspapers, billboards, brochures and pamphlets, direct mail, and salesmen received tenth through 14th rankings, respectively.

It is also important to note that some information sources received significant numbers of unimportant and/or uncertain ratings. For example, two sources, salesmen and direct mail, were evaluated as unimportant by more than one-fifth of the sample. In addition, six information sources received uncertain and/or unimportant votes by one-third or more of the top executives. These sources were English-language magazines and newspapers, billboards, brochures and pamphlets, direct mail, and salesmen.

The paper will next place these findings in their proper perspective. This goal will be reached when statistical findings are rationalized with the support of facts from the Saudi environment. For ease of presentation, the 14 information sources are classified into impersonal and interpersonal sources. In the case of impersonal sources, information is communicated indirectly through print or audio/video media. For interpersonal sources, information is received through face-to-face communication with another person. A respondent's own personal experience is included as an interpersonal source.

#### *Impersonal sources*

As can be seen from Table III, all the different types of impersonal sources for receiving information were perceived as important by a majority of the executives. However, some sources were perceived as being more important than others, as reflected by a larger degree of consensus among the executives.

Arabic language newspapers and magazines were ranked first and third in importance, respectively. The publication statistics highlight the importance of Arabic newspapers and magazines in Saudi Arabia. A total of

## English is widely spoken

	Rank	Important	Percentage Uncertain	Unimportant
Arabic newspapers	1	80.6	16.4	3.0
Trade shows and exhibitions	2	77.6	13.4	9.0
Arabic magazines	3	76.1	16.4	7.5
Gulf television	4	71.7	17.9	10.4
English magazines	5	65.7	25.3	9.0
English newspapers	6	62.7	26.9	10.4
Billboards	7	56.7	28.4	14.9
Brochures and pamphlets	8	52.3	37.3	10.4
Direct mail	9	52.2	26.9	20.9

*Table III. Rank order of impersonal sources*

12 Arabic-language newspapers and 47 magazines are currently published in Saudi Arabia. Although Saudi Arabia is a small country of about 13-14 million people, some of these publications report audited circulation figures that range from 25,000 to 260,000 (Tuncalp, 1994b).

The second largest portion of the executives rated trade shows and exhibitions as important sources of information. Trade shows and exhibitions have gained eminence in Saudi Arabia, especially during the last several years. Currently, every major city in the kingdom possesses several large and modern exhibition centers. Some centers are not-for-profit and are managed by the private sector through the Chamber of Commerce and/or the Ministry of Industry and Electricity. Other exhibition centers are owned and operated for profit by establishments in the private sector.

The fourth ranked information source was Gulf television. Considering the fact that this study was conducted in the eastern province of Saudi Arabia, this finding was not surprising. Currently, the broadcasts of three Saudi channels and several other Gulf television stations belonging to Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman, reach audiences in the region (Tuncalp, 1992).

The English language magazines and newspapers were ranked fifth and sixth in order of importance. English is widely spoken in the eastern province. The importance of English-language magazines and newspapers can be explained in two ways. One is the presence of the oil industry in the province and the American involvement in this sector since the discovery of oil in the region during the early 1930s. The second is the presence of two universities in the region which use English as the primary means of communication. These universities are the King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals (KFUPM) and the King Faisal University (KFU). In addition, at least one television channel in each Gulf country and two channels in Saudi Arabia broadcast exclusively in English for audiences in this region.

The seventh ranked information source is billboards. Billboards in English and Arabic are extensively used in the eastern province (Tuncalp, 1994a). However, several climatic conditions pose serious problems to the effectiveness of billboards. In addition, there are no uniform or standard industry practices with respect to size, cost, quality, and maintenance aspects of billboards.

### Lowest ranking

The eighth-ranked information source is brochures and pamphlets. This source received the highest percentage of unimportant ratings from the executives in the sample. The use of brochures and pamphlets to distribute information has been very limited in Saudi Arabia. Saudi customs and tradition do not allow strangers to deliver items either by visiting homes to hand-deliver them or by slipping them under doors unannounced. For this reason, brochures and pamphlets are often distributed at major street intersections where the traffic stops momentarily waiting for the lights to change. The person distributing pamphlets will try to hand out copies to drivers who promptly throw them back out on the street or place them somewhere inside the car to be forgotten and thrown out on the next time the car is cleaned.

Finally, direct mail received the lowest ranking in terms of how important it was to the top executives as a source of information. This finding is also not surprising because the use of direct mail is hampered by the local postal system. Currently, mail is not delivered to home addresses. Every person, who needs a mail-drop, is assigned a mailbox at a post office. These mailbox owners are required occasionally to visit their post offices to pick up their mail. In addition, the post office authorities are reluctant to deal with "junk mail". These conditions make it difficult to reach customers through direct mail.

#### *Interpersonal sources*

As can be seen from Table IV, except for one source, all interpersonal sources for information were evaluated as important by a majority of the executives included in the sample. However, some sources were rated as more important than others. For example, nearly all executives considered past experience as the most important source of information.

Similarly, respondents evaluated relatives and family members as the second most important source of information. Friends and colleagues at work were rated as the third most important information source. The surveyed executives considered neighbors as the fourth most important source of information for them.

The respondents were not in agreement about the importance of salesmen as a source of information. About two-fifth of them indicated uncertainty about the importance of salesmen, and an equal proportion expressed the view that salesmen were important sources. About one-quarter of respondents rated salesmen as unimportant sources of information.

Selling as a marketing activity is despised by the general populace in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, salesmen are not highly valued in terms of prestige of their professions (Tahir and Yavas, 1982). Salesmen are looked on as

	Rank	Important	Percentage Uncertain	Unimportant
Past experiences	1	91.0	9.0	0.0
Relatives and family members	2	79.1	14.9	6.0
Friends and colleagues at work	3	74.7	14.9	10.4
Neighbors	4	70.1	23.9	6.0
Salesmen	5	37.3	38.8	23.9

*Table IV. Rank order of interpersonal sources*



## Summarized in two categories

untrustworthy persons who will do anything to make their commissions. They are seen as working only for their own benefit, thereby providing no useful services for the customer.

### Managerial implications

The findings of the study can be summarized under two general categories. First, executives consistently evaluated several information sources as being important. These sources included past experience, relatives and family members, trade shows and exhibitions, friends and colleagues at work, and Arabic newspapers and magazines. Second, a significant portion of the sample rated some information sources as unimportant. These sources included salesmen, brochures and pamphlets, direct mail, billboards, and English newspapers and magazines. These findings have a number of implications for the marketing managers of international companies wanting to sell goods and services in Saudi Arabia.

Actual product usage as reflected by past experience seems to be an important determinant of purchase decision among the executives. Therefore, the marketing manager needs to design either a selling strategy that stimulates purchase experience or one that simulates it. For example, the marketing manager can stimulate trial by offering free samples and/or other forms of sales promotion such as: price discounts and extended credit policy for a limited time period; free maintenance service for a limited period for the first purchase; discount on spare parts for the initial purchase; training help for the first batch of customer's operators, and so on.

In addition, the marketing manager can simulate experience for the buyers by including product or service demonstrations as part of the marketing strategy. These demonstrations should be designed to give customers a feeling for the benefits of the products similar to feelings that they would have gained after actually using the products.

## Monitoring exhibitions

Another source of information that is perceived as important by executives is trade shows and exhibitions. It is imperative that the marketing managers of multinational companies monitor the exhibitions planned in centers located in large cities throughout the kingdom and make every effort to participate in these trade shows and exhibitions as a significant component of their marketing effort in Saudi Arabia.

The executives included in the study sample cited relatives and family members, and friends and colleagues at work as important sources of information. These sources should also be exploited by the international marketing manager. One means of activating these interpersonal sources would be through a word-of-mouth approach. Since Saudi society is structured according to tribes and extended family, word-of-mouth can be very effective in disseminating information among customers. For example, the marketing manager could design advertising campaigns encouraging people toward word-of-mouth communication among family members and friends. Advertisements announcing that it is proper to "pass the message to a friend" or that it is all right to "tell your loved ones" would go a long way in stimulating interpersonal communication among family and friends in Saudi Arabia favorable to the products and services of the international marketing manager.

## Valuable sources of information

Arabic-language newspapers and magazines are also perceived as valuable sources of information by the executives. Consequently, an effective promotion strategy should include advertisements placed in Arabic newspapers and magazines. However, in view of the shortcomings of this print medium (Tuncalp, 1994b), marketing managers need to balance the limited market-reach achieved by their circulation potential against the high impact value of the advertisements appearing in these information sources when considering spending advertising moneys on Arabic-language publications in Saudi Arabia.

Finally, the international marketing manager should use sparingly or should avoid if possible those information sources that were perceived as not very important by the executives. For example, billboards, brochures and pamphlets, direct mail, English-language newspapers and magazines, and salesmen were perceived as not that important by the surveyed executives.

As the negative image enjoyed by salesmen is difficult to overcome, the international marketing manager should employ salesmen under different occupational titles to give the impression that they are there to serve the customers rather than themselves or the companies they represent. Some job titles that could give salesmen a different image in the eyes of the buyers include account executive, brand manager, service executive, product engineer, public relations officer, and customer liaison person.

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*This summary has been provided to allow managers and executives a rapid appreciation of the content of this article. Those with a particular interest in the topic covered may then read the article in toto to take advantage of the more comprehensive description of the research undertaken and its results to get the full benefit of the material present*

## **Executive summary and implications for managers and executives**

### **Media planning needs good information**

Most marketers will have encountered the “research” presented by sales reps from magazines, newspapers or television stations. This research – usually based on so-called “reader surveys” – purports to demonstrate that the medium in question:

- delivers the right target audience;
- represents the information source of choice for the market; and
- provides a more cost-effective communications solution.

Such a presentation is often supported by data from trade body or industry surveys looking at where buyers get their information. And this information is always selected to “puff up” the medium being sold. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not suggesting that this research is wrong. Indeed the best of such research does provide useful market information and can guide the selection of media for an advertising campaign. But the research is not independent and does not necessarily represent a full picture of buyer media consumption.

Tuncalp describes a study looking at the information sources preferred by Saudi Arabian business buyers. Not surprisingly the value placed on an information source seems to be related to its perceived independence from the organization promoting its product. At the top of the list we see personal experience and contacts plus local media while the bottom of the list features direct information from the seller – brochures, direct mail and salespeople.

There are two issues arising from Tuncalp’s study that deserve some discussion:

- (1) What information sources are available for those planning industrial marketing campaigns?
- (2) Can we generalise the findings from a study of Saudi Arabian business people to other markets?

### **Information – the life blood of media planning**

Planners and buyers of advertising rely heavily on data for their work. Such data take three forms:

- (1) past records from the advertiser and the advertiser’s industry – response data, market research and sales information;
- (2) independent information about media – readership, circulation, response rates, etc.; and
- (3) media-provided data – research from the various media covering demographics, decision-makers and other information helpful to sales.

Crucially the media planner will ask a series of questions about each medium:

- When will the target customer see the communication? There is a recognised difference in attitude and response between the information seen while the target customer is at work and that he sees while at home or in a leisure situation.
- Why is the target customer seeing the advertisement? Because it’s in a publication or during a show that person looks at? Or because the

*person is actively seeking out information about their business or, better still, the type of product or service you are advertising?*

- *How do we want the target customer to respond? Do we want them to register our brand name in an appropriate context? Or do we want them to pick up the phone and make an enquiry?*

*The media planner will seek to answer these questions through information from the client about the advertising strategy and by referring to the information sources already described. The resulting plan is then assessed against the client's objectives – sales leads, greater brand awareness, trade show attendance or whatever.*

*What is clear from Tuncalp's study is that (in Saudi Arabia at least) business people will seek to inform themselves before they contact the potential vendors. This puts the onus on the vendor to:*

- *manage word-of-mouth communications by working with existing users to promote the product or service;*
- *establish what information prompts the buyer to move from interest to asking for contact; and*
- *integrate public relations and press relations strategies with the advertising.*

*Above all, we see that trade shows are the area where the advertiser has control and the prospective buyer is receptive to their blandishments. We know that buyers value trade shows as information sources and Tuncalp's findings confirm that the social interaction on neutral territory provides the seller with a great opportunity to open dialog with prospects.*

#### ***Saudi Arabia – typical or untypical?***

*It strikes me that, while there will be similarities in media consumption and information source preference between Saudi Arabia and other countries, the ranking of preferred information sources will vary. The significance placed by Saudi business people on the views of family is unlikely to be reflected everywhere since many cultures lack the close relationship between family and business life we see in Saudi Arabia.*

*Furthermore, the influence of language and culture may not always put home-language publications ahead of English-language publications. In India, for example, the multiplicity of languages has resulted in English being the language of business communications.*

*The study of information sources for business decision making needs to take account of differing business cultures just as do other areas of marketing research. Tuncalp demonstrates that strong relationships, the management of word-of-mouth communications and effective PR represent the core of an industrial communications strategy. If these elements are not in place, the advertising and sales strategies will need to work much harder to generate the response wanted from potential customers.*

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1. Goitom Tesfom, Nancy J. Birch, Jeffrey N. Culver. 2017. Do Mobile Phone Service Consumers in the US Have Media Preference as Their Source of Information on Competing Mobile Phone Service Plans?. *Journal of Promotion Management* **40**, 1-22. [[Crossref](#)]
2. Mumtaz A. Anwar, Arwa Tuqan. 2006. Information needs and use in the construction materials sector in Kuwait. *The Electronic Library* **24**:3, 335-346. [[Abstract](#)] [[Full Text](#)] [[PDF](#)]